

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SOCIAL CARE AND SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel was held on 9 March 2020.

PRESENT: Councillor Garvey (Chair), Councillor Dodds (Vice Chair); Councillors: Cooke, Rathmell (substitute for Councillor Hill), Rooney (substitute for Councillor Wright), Saunders, Uddin, J Walker and Wilson.

OFFICERS: S Butcher, J Dixon and S Williams.

PRESENT BY INVITATION: Members of the Children and Young People's Learning Scrutiny Panel:-
Councillors: Hellaoui, Higgins, and Nugent.

PRESENT AS OBSERVERS: K Allison and S Fisher – Parents 4 Change
J Cain – Local Democracy Reporter.

APOLOGIES for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Hill and Wright.

**** DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

There were no Declarations of Interest made by Members at this point in the meeting.

WELCOME AND EVACUATION PROCEDURE

The Chair welcomed those present to the meeting and provided details on the Fire Evacuation Procedure.

MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel held on 10 February 2020 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

Several queries were raised, as follows:-

- Page 2 – In response to a query as to the meaning of 'RAG Rating', the Director of Children's Services explained that it was a 'traffic light' management system using Red, Amber and Green to indicate the status of each task/activity. In this instance, a RAG Rating for each action and activity on the immediate assurance plan had been provided, indicating: Red – not complete/out of timescales; Amber – active with further work required, not complete; Green – on track/complete.
- Page 2 - reference to "Ofsted's concerns that the local authority was not aware of the number of children held overnight in Police custody..." – it was queried whether the children referred to were children in care. It was confirmed that they were children and young people that were either known to Social Care or Youth Offending services.
- Page 4 – in response to a query as to whether Ofsted had seen the Immediate Assurance Plan, it was confirmed that Ofsted had seen the Plan. In addition, the wider Improvement Plan was being drafted and this would be discussed, in detail, with Ofsted on 23 April 2020.
- Page 4 – reference was made to the department's improvement journey taking two to three years and it was queried who had made that forecast. The Director of Children's Services advised that she had made the judgement, based on her experience.

UPDATE – PREVIOUS REVIEW – FAMILY AND FRIENDS CARE (KINSHIP CARERS), NOVEMBER 2017

The Chair welcomed those present to the meeting and explained that, at its meeting on 17 February 2020, the Children and Young People's Learning Scrutiny Panel requested an update on a previous

scrutiny review undertaken by the former Children and Learning Scrutiny Panel in 2017 in relation to Family and Friends Care (Kinship Carers). It was decided that the review topic fell within the remit of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel and, as such, Members of the Children and Young People's Learning Scrutiny Panel had been invited to attend the Panel meeting.

The Chair acknowledged that there had been significant changes within Children's Services since the review was undertaken and had invited appropriate officers to update the Panel in relation to the current position regarding Kinship Carers in Middlesbrough.

Subsequently, S Butcher, Director of Children's Services and S Williams, Head of Looked After Children and Corporate Parenting, were in attendance at the meeting to provide the Scrutiny Panel with updated information.

The Director tabled a presentation to Members providing background and context to Kinship Care and also provided an updated Action Plan document.

The Panel heard that Middlesbrough had a high number of children living in Kinship Care – this arrangement was often preferred as it allowed children who could not be cared for by their parent(s) to remain within the extended family or with a close friend, rather than being looked after by mainstream foster carers who were unknown to the child. Kinship Care, also known as Family and Friends Care or Connected Persons Care, was not unusual and many local authorities had seen an increase in the placement of children in Kinship Care Placements.

In Middlesbrough, there were currently:-

- 163 children in active kinship placements
- 80 subject to a Care Order
- 60 subject to an Interim Care Order
- 1 subject to a Placement Order
- 22 subject to Section 20 accommodation.

Over the last three years, 161 children in Middlesbrough had ceased to be looked after due to permanent placements being secured with a Kinship Carer. This was due to a Child Arrangement Order being granted in respect of 81 children and a Special Guardianship Order being made in respect of 80 children.

It was explained to the Panel that when children are removed from their parent(s) care, by Children's Social Care, all available options are considered for the care of the children, known as permanence planning. This usually includes assessments to consider rehabilitation to the care of birth parent(s) but also assessment of kinship carers to establish if the child can remain in the care of the wider family. This is usually done using two main legal frameworks – a Child Arrangement Order or Special Guardianship Order, or another option was long term fostering.

In terms of the local offer to Kinship Carers in Middlesbrough, the Panel was advised that a variety of support was available, as follows:-

- During the interim phase whilst the child remained a Looked After Child, the carer was allocated their own Social Worker, from the Fostering Team. The SW would support, assist, and befriend the carer and help navigate them through the process.
- Kinship Carers were provided with financial support by way of an age-related fostering allowance.
- Additional bespoke arrangements, such as support to purchase items of furniture, could be provided where appropriate.

A discussion ensued and the following issues were raised:-

- Clarification was sought in relation to the definition of a Kinship Carer and whether they were entitled to financial support in undertaking the role. The Panel was advised that where there

was an active prevention of a parent caring for their child, the local authority might place that child in the care of a suitable family member or close friend. If the local authority made the placement, this became a foster placement and the carer(s) became a foster carer and, therefore, the appropriate fostering allowance was paid accordingly.

- It was explained that, for example, where a parent asked an aunt to look after their child, the local authority would not provide financial support as this was a private arrangement made between two adults. This type of arrangement was sometimes known as a private fostering arrangement, however, it was acknowledged that the word 'fostering' was not helpful in this instance.
- In response to a query regarding what support and training was available for Kinship Carers, it was explained that an immediate viability assessment was undertaken in relation to the family member to ensure it was a safe arrangement for the child. The carer would be granted a temporary approval for up to 16 weeks and during that 16-week period, an in-depth assessment was carried out. The assessment met the National Minimum Standards for Foster Carers and was applicable to kinship and mainstream carers. In cases where a potential kinship carer did not satisfy the national minimum standards, the Council would look at ways of working creatively with the carer and other agencies, where appropriate, to rectify this, assuming that the individual(s) was a suitable person to care for a child. For example, there may be an issue regarding the number of bedrooms in the family home, therefore, social care would work with housing providers etc, to look for a solution. Once the kinship carer had been formally approved, they were allocated a Social Worker from the Fostering Team. All foster carers had access to the same foster carer training regardless of whether they were mainstream carers or kinship carers and kinship carer. Kinship carers were provided with an age-related fostering allowance and bespoke support.
- When a child was placed in a foster placement, the foster carer received a fee and an allowance. The age-related fostering allowance was currently paid weekly at: £129 for 0-2 years; £132 for 3-4 years; £146 for 5-10 years; £167 for 11-15 years and £194 for 16-17 years. The allowance was not means-tested. An additional allowance was paid on the child's birthday and at Christmas. As well as an age-related fostering allowance, a fee was paid to carers when a child was placed with them. The fees consisted of two tiers. Tier one paid at £50 and tier two paid at £100. This was based on the foster carers skills and experience.
- In response to a query it was clarified that support and payment of an allowance started from day one of the placement.
- A Panel Member commented that the cost of paying an allowance to a kinship carer was significantly lower than a residential placement and that kinship carers should be provided with relevant legal advice and signposting to other agencies such as housing and benefits, as a minimum. The Head of Service stated that in many cases some of the only placements available to children were independent foster placements and the cost of those placements was also higher than using in-house foster carers.
- Anecdotal information was provided by some Panel Members in relation to cases where family members, particularly grandparents, had been asked to care for a child/children by Children's Social Care, but did not receive any support, financial or otherwise. The Director of Children's Services advised Members that she would be happy to discuss such cases outside of the Scrutiny Panel to examine whether previous practice had been conducted correctly and that she needed to be made aware of any such scenarios. Where a child needed to be placed with a foster carer, it was always preferable to place with a family member that the child knew and was happy with and, where no such person was available, then the child would be placed with mainstream foster carers. It was reiterated that kinship carers should be treated the same as mainstream recruited foster carers in terms of accessing support, training and payment of an allowance.
- The Director of Children's Services stated that it was important that such issues were heard and actioned and that, in terms of the current position, this formed part of the Service's improvement plan and the drive to improve practice. Members were already aware of the Immediate Assurance Plan and a Wider Improvement Plan was currently being developed. This would be

overseen by the Head of Service and Social Workers would be well versed in delivering improved practice.

- A Member expressed concern at engagement with Members as part of the scrutiny process to ensure actions had been completed within timescales and that updates were comprehensive. The Director assured the Panel that she would be more than happy to be tasked with providing further updates if Members found this helpful.
- In response to a query with regard to support for carers with Special Guardianship Orders, the Panel was advised that the local authority paid a means-tested Special Guardianship allowance for up to three years and implemented a Special Guardianship support plan for those carers that wanted support. In terms of permanence, the local authority considered all available options and it was always better for the child not to have constant social worker intervention.
- It was queried whether, once a looked after child was allocated a Social Worker, they kept that Social Worker. The Director acknowledged that there were currently too many changes of Social Workers for children that were looked after and those subject to child protection plans and that the department was seeking to minimise this. On a positive note, the authority did not have a high proportion of agency workers and had a stable group of Independent Reviewing Officers who provided a good degree of continuity for children.
- In response to a query regarding the numbers of children looked after in Middlesbrough, the Panel was advised that there were currently 600 children looked after and this was the highest proportion per 10,000 of the population in the country. It was highlighted that the recent Ofsted report stated that Middlesbrough did not take children into care soon enough and that neglect was not being recognised early enough. This coupled with a young, inexperienced social workforce resulted in more children coming into care. Another reason for high numbers of children looked after in Middlesbrough was that they were not being moved on to permanence quickly and successfully enough. Practice needed to be improved significantly to ensure permanent homes were found for children, therefore, improvements around permanence planning would be pushed forward as part of the department's improvement journey.
- In response as to whether the Council had a specialist lead for Kinship Care and Special Guardianship Orders, the Panel was advised that S Williams, Head of Looked After Children and Corporate Parenting was the Strategic Lead and the Operational Lead would be the new Fostering Manager who was due to commence in post week commencing 16 March 2020.
- It was acknowledged that many services had been lost due to austerity measures and it was queried whether there were any plans to reinstate intervention services. The Director responded that No Wrong Door was anticipated to be up and running within the next few months which would support children, aged 12 plus, on the edge of care. Work was being undertaken to examine reshaping the intervention team and resource workers to ensure they were directed to where they were most needed. The Ofsted resource plan set out the additional resources required in order to support the department's improvement journey.

In relation to the previous scrutiny recommendations made in relation to the Kinship Care review undertaken in 2017, the Director advised that a number of those had progressed and were now part of embedded practices and some of the recommendations were not necessarily relevant.

Following Ofsted's inspection and inadequate judgement, there needed to be change and improvement in current working practices and kinship care was one of those areas. The wider improvement plan would be the main driver for change. It was recognised that achieving permanence for Middlesbrough's children looked after in a timely way was a pivotal part of the department's improvement and the service and support offer for kinship carers in Middlesbrough also needed to improve.

The local authority was aware that the service offer to children in kinship arrangements was not consistently good and that this needed to improve. This would include:-

- Improved permanence planning – ensuring children arrived at their final destination in a timely way that was best for them.

- Improved support for carers both in the short and long term, practically and financially.
- Improved interaction with those caring for someone else's child as they often knew the child best.
- Improved and consistent support arrangements for all.
- Support post order.

A discussion was held in relation to the current arrangements for kinship carers and the following issues were raised:-

- It was queried what initial information was provided to kinship carers. The Panel was informed that they received an information pack, however, it was acknowledged that this needed to be consistently provided prior to a child being placed wherever possible or at the very least the day that the child was placed.
- A Panel Member commented that basic signposting on the Council's website was poor and asked whether this could be improved as soon as possible. The Director agreed that this issue should be looked at.
- The Head of Service added that feedback from mainstream foster carers was that the exchange of information was not good enough and discussions had taken place as to how this could be improved. From April 2020, a monthly drop-in session would be available for all foster carers to meet the Head of Service and the Fostering Team.
- In relation to the drop-in sessions, a Member queried whether there were any plans to involve groups such as Grandparents Plus or Parents 4Change. The Director advised that this was something that could be explored and would be happy to discuss outside the meeting with the Chair.
- In terms of keeping Members up to date, a Member highlighted the importance of some form of written update being provided so that there was a record of the information being provided, this could be then used to compare whether particular actions or recommendations had been implemented etc. This could be in the form of a simple briefing note.

Finally, it was acknowledged that being a Kinship Carer was not easy. Whilst it provided support within families it could also change family relationships. It also meant that Kinship Carers had to comply with everything that applied to mainstream carers which could be difficult when they were ultimately a family member. The right balance needed to be achieved as they were foster carers in the eyes of the law.

All foster carers had an allocated Supervising Social Worker - responsible for helping to support foster carers and, in the case of Kinship Carers, explaining how their role as a foster carer worked. Grandparents Plus also helped to fill gaps in information provision.

In relation to the updated action plan circulated at the meeting, the following issues were raised:-

- A Member of the Panel referred to the updated action plan, circulated at the meeting, specifically to recommendation p) ... "That the views of children in family and friends care, and their carers, be sought regularly to inform practice and the delivery of support services. Furthermore, that the local authority identifies how policies have been informed by their views." The response stated that "The CiCC and mini-CiCC are one way of obtaining children's views..." and it was queried how this worked. It was explained that the Children in Care Council (CiCC) and a Care Leavers Group fed into the Corporate Parenting Board. It was acknowledged that children and young people should each be consulted on their own plans as a matter of course. In addition, the Mind of My Own app had been developed for young people to share their views. Unfortunately, this had not been as successful as anticipated and a larger representation was sought. The Panel Member stated it would be good to capture the views of young people without them having to physically attend a group.

- The Chair of Corporate Parenting Board stated that she had met with the Youth Participation Officer and was advised that there were currently five young people in the Care Leavers Forum, five in the mini Children in Care Council (ages 5-13) and just one member in the Children in Care Council (ages 14 plus). They were currently examining ways of having a recruitment drive for the groups and looking at ways of involving them in the Corporate Parenting Board meetings to encourage young people to engage in opportunities to voice their views and opinions. The Director agreed that ways of engaging young people needed to be examined and highlighted that some young people did not want to identify as being a child looked after and some did not live in the Middlesbrough area.
- The Head of Service informed Members that there were two strands to the participation work. One was in relation to service development and improvement by involving young people and the second was to involve the child on an individual level by contributing to their own plan. It was highlighted that the Independent Reviewing Officers met with children prior to any looked after reviews to obtain their views. In addition, a child's Social Worker should also obtain the child's views during the looked after review process.
- The Review and Development Unit Manager had established internal mechanisms where concerns could be raised in relation to the plan for a child. In addition, Children's Services used the NYAS (National Youth Advocacy Service) which was accessible to all young people. So any child who was not happy with their plan should be able to be referred to NYAS.
- A Young Commissioners Group had also been established which would obtain the views of that group in relation to any contracts being tendered for. The Group had also been involved in interviews for posts within the service, but more young people were needed to represent the group.
- A Member proposed that the Chair meet with the Director of Children's Services to work through the plan and to prioritise each of the points in order to identify the key issues pertinent to the Scrutiny Panel.
- The Chair and Director agreed that the best way forward would be to establish a sequence of issues in priority order for the Panel to be updated on.
- It was highlighted that the Children and Young People's Learning Scrutiny Panel had requested the update in relation to Kinship Care and requested that Members of that Panel be invited to any meetings of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel depending upon the topic being considered, where it cross-referenced their Panel.
- In relation to a query regarding current Social Workers' sickness absence, it was confirmed that there were five Social Workers on long term sick leave out of a total workforce of 175.

The Chair thanked the Officers for their attendance and the information provided.

AGREED as follows:-

1. That the information provided in relation to Kinship Carers be noted.
2. That the Chair meet with the Director of Children's Services to examine the Immediate Assurance Plan and identify the key priorities for the Panel to be updated on.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD UPDATE

The Chair provided a verbal update to the Panel in relation to the business conducted at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 13 February 2020, namely:-

- Update from Children's Services.
- Budget Consultation results.
- Final Report– Economic Development, Environment and Infrastructure Scrutiny Panel – Infrastructure Delivery.
- Executive Forward Work Programme.
- Scrutiny Chairs Update.

AGREED that the information provided be noted.

DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel was scheduled for Monday, 20 April 2020 at 4.00pm.